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This idyllic US town was full of police families - and a serial killer in their midst

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Senior US reporter

The arrest of architect Rex Heuermann for the murders of several women sent shockwaves through this close-knit community, home to many law enforcement officers

Massapequa, its residents proudly proclaim, is a "cop town".

Perched on Long Island's idyllic South Shore, it is just an hour's journey via train from Manhattan.

The community is home to New York Police Department (NYPD) detectives, multi-generational police families, officers from Nassau and Suffolk Counties, and members of myriad other law enforcement agencies.

And when body parts started to be discovered in 2010 on Gilgo Beach - not far from where local teens work as lifeguards and families gather in the summer - it became clear that a serial killer had been active on Long Island for years.

The rumour mill went into overdrive. Was he local? Was he still hunting? And was he, after operating for so long without getting caught, perhaps even wearing a badge?

The 2023 arrest of architect Rex Heuermann put to rest those theories - and his admission in court this week to the murders of eight women has brought even further "closure" to Long Island police, they said.

"It's a great relief," said Craig Garland, a retired NYPD detective, Massapequa resident and Little League baseball organiser. "There were people out there trying to pin this on a cop and... it brings great closure to the law enforcement

community at large [that] this wasn't a cop that was a serial killer."

Watch: Key moments in the Gilgo Beach serial killings case

Heuermann, a 62-year-old married father-of-two, was arrested in July 2023 in Manhattan after authorities obtained his DNA from a discarded piece of pizza outside his mid-town office.

- Serial killer admits to eight murders in Long Island case

His daily commute from Massapequa Park to New York City took him right past the local police bar Johnny McGorey's, a popular pub directly next to a rail station where officers drank and discussed the hunt for the murderer as Heuermann made his way to and from his unkempt house just a few streets away.

When bodies started being discovered, members of the homicide unit "were our Friday night regular guys", said McGorey's owner Joanne Fountain, describing them as

Getty Images

Investigators comb Heuermann's home for evidence

"He's covering his tracks so well and, you know, is there a possibility it could be a cop?" Garland recalled people would speculate. "Listen, there's always a possibility it could be anybody."

Scandal hits the police department

There are "probably more cops that live in [the] Massapequa, Massapequa Park area than any other part of Long Island", said Bob Livoti, president of the Association of Retired Police Officers. He called the area "the hub" of Long Island's already police-heavy population.

Fountain uses one of her own bar staff as an example of a familiar family pattern in Massapequa.

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"His dad was a cop, his grandpa was a cop and he just got hired onto NYPD too," she said.

Massapequa police families "eat, sleep and breathe it", she added.

And that legacy extends across other first-responder jobs: Massapequa is home to many firefighters, medics and officers from other agencies. It was particularly hard-hit on 9/11, with the surrounding Nassau County losing around 350 people, including many first responders.

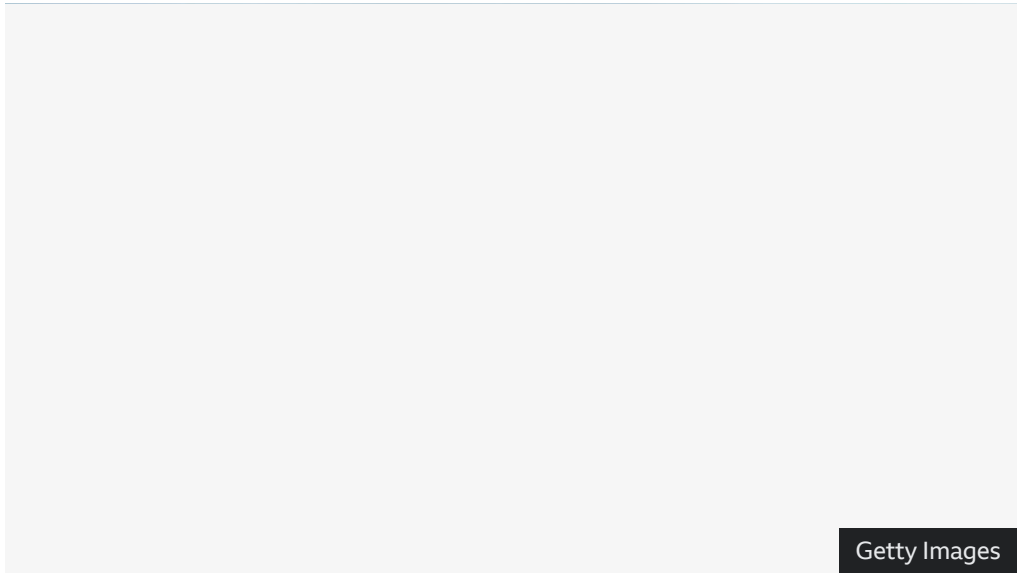
"As an administrator and someone who was a cop, it was very frustrating that it took so long to discover... [who's] responsible for these murders," said John Azzata, Nassau County's retired head of homicide.

But the case of Gilgo Beach plagued law enforcement in more ways than one.

The situation wasn't helped when Suffolk County Police Chief Jimmy Burke, then in charge of the Gilgo Beach investigation, was arrested in 2013 on sensational charges involving sex toys, pornography, coercion of witnesses and a cover-up.

Burke entered the home of Christopher Loeb, a man arrested for probation violations, to retrieve a bag of sex toys and pornography that Loeb had stolen from Burke's department-issued SUV, according to the US Attorney's Office. He then beat Loeb while in police custody and tried to get others to cover it up.

He pleaded guilty in 2016 to reduced charges and was sentenced to 46 months in prison.



In 2010, remains were found on Gilgo Beach, triggering an investigation that would take over a decade to solve

The debacle also led to related charges and five-year prison sentences for former Suffolk County District Attorney Thomas J Spota and Christopher McPartland, the former chief of investigations for the District Attorney's Office and, ironically, chief of the government corruption bureau.

These allegations of corruption – amongst the same Suffolk officials tasked with investigating the murders of sex workers – only added fuel to the conspiracy theories around law enforcement connections to the serial killer. So did the fact that Burke had edged co-operation with the FBI into,

But the scandal was perfect fodder for armchair sleuths and conspiracy theorists, and the Long Island serial killer mystery persisted until Heuermann's arrest on 13 July 2023.

As police breathed sighs of relief that he was in custody,

those living in Massapequa were "astonished", Livoti said.
investigation, much to the dismay of many Long Islanders.
"Whoever thought this guy was living next door to anyone?"
"There was a lot of disgust," said ARPO president Livoti.
"When I was ready about it, I said: I can't believe the stuff
"I think everybody was in shock," said Garland, who realised
that this guy got away with. Unbelievable. There were so
Heuermann's child had visited the Little
many red flags and nobody did anything."
League programmes he had organised. "For anybody that
came in contact with this individual, it was a shock."
The parish has repeatedly seen first-hand the outpouring of
support from the law enforcement community.

'There's no closure for victims'

For example, when Massapequa resident and NYPD
At Massapequa's St Rose of Lima Roman Catholic Church,
detective Jonathan Diller was killed in the line of duty two
which has a high percentage of police and first responder
years ago, thousands turned out for the funeral at St Rose of
parishioners, Rev Gerard Gentleman noted how the
Lima and lined the streets.
community moved quickly from shock to generosity and
"It's a community that responds to sadness, to tragedy, finds
their strength in being with one another and that identity,"
"People reached out, saying: 'What are we doing for
he said. "It's a middle-class, working community – lots of
[Heuermann's] family? Can we do anything?'" the pastor
cops and firemen – and that's the, I think, ethos of the
said. "And we did. We had some offerings to them and... one
community."
of our staff members did actually go and sit with his wife for
A little while
And the ethos will likely be relied upon heavily since
Heuermann's guilty pleas.
"Obviously, there was also concern: 'My goodness, this was
"It brings great closure to everybody that this individual is
happening right here in our town. How is this individual
behind bars," Gentleman said. "He is the evil guy, and it's great
able to do this?' And I think that the overall theme was
relief that everybody is going to be protected as well for the
that everybody is going to be protected as well for the
sadness".
Azzata, for his part, feels "happy that this individual was
"People look at Massapequa as a close-knit community,
arrested and he will plead guilty and put this whole

and this year.

amid this year's very disruptive and shattering," he said.

While police may feel vindicated, however, and while Massapequa – and wider Long Island – might feel safer, Azzata pointed out that even a guilty plea will only do so much for the loved ones of the murdered women.

"People say they get closure - there's no closure," he said.

"You may get justice, but victims' families never get closure."

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